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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated Vincent Tinto's longitudinal model for student attrition by examining recent college dropouts' perceptions of their experiences and their decision to leave college. Tinto's model argues that individual departure arises from a longitudinal process of interaction between a student's attributes, skills, dispositions, and other members of the academic and social systems at the college. Descriptive accounts were obtained by interviewing 18 students (12 female and 6 male) who had recently withdrawn from several Utah universities. The interviews supported Tinto's model as they revealed that students view their departure from college in terms of isolation and incongruence. Students saw faculty-student interaction as essential for a positive educational experience and mentoring relationships appeared to have the greatest impact on academic and social integration and student retention. In addition, the results found that gender expectations and family background were strongly related to students' decisions to leave. This challenges Tinto's claim that personal characteristics influencing students "intention and commitment" are less significant in dropout decisions. Appendixes include a figure of Tinto's model and an interview format. (Contains 39 references.) (JB)

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Missing Opportunities:

Drop-Outs and a Failure to Find a Mentor

by

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Western States Communication Association

February 14, 1993

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Vincent Tinto's longitudinal model of student attrition. More specifically, it identified the role family background and gender play in student departure and the role of mentoring relationships in overcoming student isolation and incongruence. The purpose of the study was to discover how students describe their own college experiences and their decisions to leave school. Descriptive accounts were obtained by interviewing students who had recently withdrawn from Utah universities. The interviews revealed that students do view their departure from college in terms of isolation and incongruence and see faculty-student interaction as essential for a positive educational experience. The study also revealed that pre-enrollment characteristics may play a more significant role in the student attrition problem than initially anticipated.

* the names of the participants in this study have been changed to protect their right to privacy.

Missing Opportunities:

Drop-Outs and a Failure to Find a Mentor

INTRODUCTION

Attrition in higher education is of escalating concern for administrators, college recruiters, and faculty because it takes an economic toll on institutions. The tremendous investment of time, money and effort by recruiters and admission officers is not producing the desired match of student to institution (Ferguson 127). Forty to forty-five of every one hundred first-time entrants in college will leave without earning a degree (Tinto, "Dropout From Higher Education" 90). In fact, statistics range from a 34% to 60% loss of first-year students nationwide (Ferguson 127).

Solutions for the rising attrition rates are difficult because a "good deal of the literature on student dropout is filled with stereotypes of the character and causes of student departure" (Tinto, Leaving College 3). Despite the many studies focusing on student attrition in higher education, dropout rates have increased, and there is still much unknown about the complex process involved (Neumann 129). The one thing institutions do know, however, is that students play a very important role in determining each college's budget. In private institutions, most of the income is derived from tuition and fees, and in public institutions, income from state appropriations is generally

allocated in direct proportion to the number of students (129).

Concern for rising attrition rates is over more than mere economics. Institutions fear that students who leave higher education may never return; research suggests that students leaving college early can develop negative attitudes toward intellectual achievement and about education in general (Ferguson 127).

Research outlining the most recognized causes and cures of student attrition was in large measure pioneered by Vincent Tinto, who developed an interactive model to explain the longitudinal process by which individuals come to leave institutions of higher education.

Tinto's model (see Appendix I) argues that individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution. The individual's experience in those contexts, as indicated by academic and social integration, continually modify those intentions and commitments. Positive experiences (i.e., integrative ones) reinforce persistence through their impact on heightened intentions and commitment both to the goal of college completion and to the institution. Negative or malintegrative experiences, however, weaken intentions and commitments and enhance the likelihood of leaving (Tinto, Leaving College 113).

Although his model has been highly useful in explaining the

general reasons for student departure, Tinto's use of this model has led to abstractions concerning the causes and possible solutions to the attrition problem. What seem to be lacking is a more concrete, detailed understanding of the reasons for student departure as experienced in the contexts of students' lives.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Extant literature is largely based on Vincent Tinto's work. The research spans a time frame of approximately two decades and is largely grounded in Tinto's 1975 study. Early attrition research by Tinto draws conclusions concerning attrition (i.e., what are its causes) which are widely accepted today and are used as the basis for current attrition research.

Tinto began his 1975 study by explaining the shortcomings of the "extensive research" that had already been conducted on student attrition. Tinto stated:

> In large measure, the failure of past research to delineate more clearly the multiple characteristics of dropout can be traced to two major shortcomings; namely, inadequate attention given to questions of definition and to the development of theoretical models that seek to explain, not simply to describe, the processes that bring individuals to leave institutions of higher education. ("Dropout from Higher Education" 89)

Tinto's explanatory model is both longitudinal and interactional in character because it emphasizes the longitudinal process of interactions which arise between individuals in an

institution and which over time account for the process of withdrawal or disassociation which marks student departure (Leaving College 112).

The model (see Appendix I) begins by recognizing, on the individual level, that two attributes (i.e., intention and commitment) "stand out as primary roots of departure" (Tinto, Leaving College 39). As a student begins college, that student enters with a unique family background, personal attributes, and value orientation which have a direct effect on the formulation of individual intentions and commitments regarding future education activities (115). It is those pre-entry attributes which initially influence a student's goal to complete college and the student's commitment to that goal.

On the institutional level, Tinto believes that "of the great variety of events which appear to influence student departure, four clusters of events or situations" (i.e., adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation) "stand out as leading to institutional departure" (47). Tinto defines adjustment as the process of adjusting, both socially and intellectually, to the new and sometimes quite strange world of college (49); difficulty, as the meeting of a number of minimum standards regarding academic performance (50); incongruence, as the mismatch or lack of fit between the needs, interests, and preferences of the individual and those of the institution (53); and isolation, as the absence of sufficient contact between the individual and other members of social and academic communities of the college (64).

All four events are critical to college persistence. For Tinto, however, "Patterns of incongruence and isolation, more than that of academic incompetence, appear to be central to the process of individual departure" (127). This is due to the assumption that isolation and incongruence largely preclude academic and social integration from occurring. Certainly, "academic and social integration are essential to student persistence" because without integration, student departure is all but guaranteed (128).

Tinto likens student departure to suicide. In fact, his model's roots were in Durkheim's theory of suicide. Just as Durkheim reasoned that suicide is more likely to occur when individuals are insufficiently integrated into society, Tinto argued that departure is more likely to occur when a student is insufficiently integrated into the social and academic systems of college ("Dropout from Higher Education" 91).

Presumably, lack of integration into the social system of the college will lead to low commitment to the institution and will increase the probability that individuals will decide to leave college and pursue alternative activities (92). Tinto strongly argued that a lack of social and academic integration was largely to blame for student attrition. More specifically, student attempts to become socially and academically integrated is a longitudinal process of interactions that "lead differing persons to varying forms of persistence and/or dropout behavior" (92).

While previously Tinto had used a theory of suicide to

develop his theoretical model of student attrition, he later also used research done by Dutch anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep to describe the process of student departure ("Stages of Student Departure" 439). Gennep had conducted research on rites of passage in tribal societies and concluded that rites of passage involve the distinct stages of separation, transition, and incorporation (441). While Gennep had concluded that these stages were necessary for passage into adulthood, Tinto argued that these three stages were necessary for successful social and academic integration into college (441).

The need for academic integration is based on the premise that it is not merely the absence or presence of intellectual development that determines persistence. It has more to do with the congruency between the intellectual development of the individual and the intellectual climate of the institution. If academic integration has not taken place, then chances are that the individual will voluntarily withdraw as a mean of coping with this lack of congruence (Tinto, "Dropout From Higher Education" 106).

Persistence is also closely related to a person's social integration. Like academic integration it involves the notion of congruence between the individual and the social environment. Tinto asserts, "Other things being equal, social integration should increase the likelihood that a person will remain in college" (107). This social integration occurs primarily through peer group associations, extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the

college (107). It is through interaction with the important agents of socialization (i.e., peers, faculty, and administration) that student behaviors, attitudes, and educational outcomes are influenced (Pascarella 546).

Although all types of interaction are factors in student retention, one of the most significant types in terms of its overall impact on student retention is informal student-faculty interaction (i.e., the development of mentoring relationships). Explanatory models of the persistence/dropout process suggest that for students, finding a mentor is one of the most important components of social and academic interaction (Pascarella 558). In the conclusions to a research study entitled, "Student-Faculty Informal Contact and College Outcomes," Pascarella stated:

> Statistically significant, positive associations exist between amount of student informal, nonclass contact with faculty and such educational outcomes as satisfaction with college, educational aspirations, intellectual and personal development, academic achievement, and freshman-to-sophomore-year persistence in college. (564)

Considerable research has been done which confirms the theory that faculty mentoring positively correlates to student retention. The "caring attitude of the faculty and staff" is the retention factor considered most important by institutions, according to Ferguson (128). In fact, studies now suggest that student-faculty relationships have a greater contribution to the prediction of subsequent decisions to persist or withdraw than do

even students' peer relationships (Pascarella & Terenzini, "Predicting Freshman" 72).

Based on these findings, many institutions have developed programs exclusively designed to increase informal student-faculty interaction and to build mentoring relationships. Most of these programs also emphasize the importance of academic advising for student development and retention (Young 309). Buffalo State instituted a program in which faculty members would provide counseling and advice to students during their first semester. They would thereafter refer them for "proper assistance" if necessary. Faculty became the central part of Buffalo State's program largely because "literature attaches such strong importance to faculty-student relations" (Ferguson 129).

Many institutions have implemented programs intended to help students find faculty mentors. This research has been based on the premise that as Pascarella stated:

> Much of the ferment and unrest experienced by academic institutions...has been explained as a reaction to the growing impersonalism of the multiversity and the lack of communication and nonclassroom contact between faculty and student cultures. (545)

The focus on developing mentoring relationships is based on the assumption that a student who is socially integrated to an institution is less likely to experience isolation just as a student who is academically integrated to an institution is less likely to experience incongruence. Helping students find faculty mentors is viewed as a potential means of reducing both isolation

and incongruence by improving both social and academic integration.

With magnified attention to the problems of isolation and incongruence, many researchers are downplaying the importance of the students' intentions and commitments to an institution. Tinto stated:

> Though the intentions and commitments with which individuals enter college matter, what goes on after entry matters more. It is the daily interaction of the person with other members of the college in both formal and informal academic and social domains of the college and the person's perception or evaluation of the character of those interactions that in large measure determine decisions as to staying or leaving. (Leaving College 127)

Researchers clearly seem less interested in a student's background, personal attributes and values, and how these qualities influence a student's intention and commitment. Tinto and others have concluded that pre-enrollment characteristics might have a less significant influence on student retention than expected, and their attention is now directed toward how students' institutional experiences influence their feelings of incongruence and isolation.

Clearly, incongruence and isolation are factors in student attrition and are central elements in Tinto's model of student departure. However, due to the abstraction of this model, there is a need to hear from those who have made the decision to leave

college. These descriptions provide a richer understanding of the attrition problem (e.g., to know how students who had left college describe their own college experiences and ultimately their decision to leave college) which is essential before effective cures to the problem can be developed.

Research Question

The purpose of the study is to discover how participant accounts of their college attendance and departure support and/or challenge research based on Tinto's model. The study is designed to investigate to what extent participant accounts coincide with Tinto's model, and more specifically:

1. How do students describe their departure experiences?
2. Do students who have left college actually describe their departure in terms of incongruence and isolation?
3. Do students mention particular pre-entry attributes as having significantly influenced their decision to attend college and at some subsequent point to withdraw?

METHODS

The sample was drawn through the networking method. Faculty members at each of Utah's universities were randomly selected and contacted by phone. They were asked for either inactive student listings from their respective departments or if they knew any students personally who had left college. A list of approximately 300 names was obtained, but only 50 people could be contacted because most had relocated with no forwarding address or telephone number available. The 50 people who were contacted

were informed of the study's general purpose (i.e., to obtain descriptive accounts of student departure) and asked if they were willing to be interviewed.

Of the 50 people contacted, 24 agreed to be interviewed; of those not interviewed, most seemed willing to cooperate but did not meet the criteria outline be Tinto (i.e., a student who had attended college but had left prior to earning a degree). Many had transferred to another college or were still attending part-time. Originally, interviews were scheduled with an equal number of males and females; however, six of the men who had agreed to be interviewed changed their minds. Of the eighteen individuals who were interviewed, twelve were female and six were male.

At the beginning of each interview, the general purpose of the study was explained once again and each participant was invited to ask any questions concerning the study. The interviews ranged from forty minutes to two and one half hours. Although all participants were asked the same questions, their comments varied in both breadth and depth, which accounts for the varying lengths of interviews. Interviews were taped and transcribed. The transcription notes of each interview were compared to notes taken during the interview to ensure accuracy.

The questions (see Appendix II) were designed to reveal information about one's family background, personal goals as related to college attendance, best and worst college experiences, social interaction, interaction with faculty, availability of academic advising, circumstances surrounding the decision to leave school, accounts of leaving, and the

possibility of returning to college.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were read several times, and comments were classified in terms of general themes. It was the participants' comments themselves that created the various categories. If several participants made similar comments, those comments were placed in the same category. If a comment did not seem to fit in an existing category, a new one was created. For example, once it became apparent that every participant had mentioned gender as an influence on the decision to attend and depart from college, gender became a separate grouping. Gender comments were eventually classified even more specifically based on the orientation of each comment.

RESULTS

Isolation

The data collected in this study suggests that Tinto has accurately surmised the pivotal role of mentoring relationships in student retention. While descriptive accounts by participants concur with Tinto's assumption that isolation adversely impacts student retention, the accounts provided by these students add to Tinto's explanation by detailing how the lack of mentoring relationships and informal interaction negatively impacts retention efforts. This was clearly manifest by the students' comments, as most explained their dissatisfaction with and departure from college in terms of lack of or negative interaction with faculty and advisors.

One student said that the faculty did not really care and

were just trying to weed out students (Abbott). Another student indicated:

> while attending the U, I felt like a little fish in a big sea. Professors didn't really care. They don't care if you come (to class) or not. They don't care if you learn or not. I would like to think the professors really cared, but they don't.

She further explained these feelings by explaining:

> Somehow in one of my classes my final grade was entered wrong. The professor had no idea **who** I was. I wasn't a name let alone a face. I was a social security number on a role. What did he care about my lousy grade? Maybe my grade was not important to him, but it was important to me (Hamblin).

Of the eighteen students interviewed all but one described their best and worst experiences in terms of positive or negative experience one-on-one interaction with a faculty member. This was the case with Jana Hart who described her worst college experience in terms of a psychology professor who made her feel stupid and foolish for asking for help. She said:

> Once when I did ask for help he said, 'Just ask the girl sitting next to you. She's really smart.' He had explained it once and didn't want to explain it again. He wouldn't answer student's questions, and he wouldn't go back and go over anything again. (Hart)

She said that this same professor did not make himself available for consultation during his office hours because he was too busy.

This experience contrasts Jana's best college experience which she describes in terms of a history professor who really cared about the students. She said she had always hated history, but the professor took "a subject I didn't like well or do very well in and made it fun and interesting. It was the first time I had ever gotten an A out of history." She continued:

> She (the professor) could tell I was a bit apprehensive of history in the beginning because she gave a quiz the first day of class to see where each student was. I didn't do very well, so she let me know from the beginning that she was willing to give me extra help. She made herself available before and after class and during her office hours. She even put her home number on her syllabus. I never called her at home, but it was reassuring to know she was available. She is the type of professor I would feel comfortable confiding a personal problem in as well as discussing academic matters with.

Others also described their best college experiences in terms of positive interaction with faculty in which the student received one-on-one attention from a professor. These experiences were described in the following way:

- The best college experience I ever had was a personal finance class with Dr. Peck. He (the professor) was concerned that students understood the material. He was flexible, answered questions and had a sense of humor. (Burnell)
- A child development professor knew my name and made a

point to acknowledge my opinion. He had personal interviews with each student to see how he could better help you and asked if you had any problems. (Bourman)

- I had a communication professor who really cared. He had extra meetings with students and was willing to work with you. He brought in speakers, and we even met in his home several times. He went beyond the normal classroom experiences. (Jeffries)
- I had a history professor that no matter where or when he saw me he called me by name and asked how my work in history was coming. (Tyson)
- An English professor really cared. He made detailed comments on papers. He really wanted to develop a relationship with his students. He knew each student by name by the first week of class. He would comment individually in class about papers we had written and complimented us on our papers. He went out of his way to compliment us on our work and he even called me at work to get my permission to use a part of my paper as an example in his class notes for the next quarter. (England)

The one-on-one interaction a student has with faculty members makes a difference in the student's academic and social integration and, at the very least, influences the student's attitude toward college. As one student stated:

> I believe that even if you only have one good experience with a faculty member that is enough to

> keep a lot of students in school. It might not be the entire reason, but it is a contributing factor and makes a real difference in students staying in school. Even if a student ends up dropping out for whatever reason, having had a close relationship with a faculty member makes a difference on how a student views their college experience. (Tyson)

Clearly, Tinto would agree that the one-on-one interaction characteristic of mentoring relationships reduces students' feelings of isolation. However, Tinto's research suggests that the effectiveness of this interaction should be evaluated based on quantity (i.e., more interaction is good, and less interaction is bad). The student accounts, on the other hand, suggest that mentoring relationships should be evaluated in terms of the quality of interaction rather than the quantity.

Incongruence

Besides the role isolation from faculty members and advisors plays in student attrition, incongruence has an influence as well. Many students explained that either the goals of the university were not clear to them, or they were clearly not consistent with the student's own personal goals.

Students expressed that the goals of the universities they attended were not clear. One student expressed her belief that "the main mission of college should be to educate. People shouldn't go to college with the attitude that it is to get a better job" (England). Another student, however, indicated that she found herself asking, "What do you really go to college for?

Is it to get a job or to become educated in a subject you enjoy?" She said that universities do not let students know whether their role is to educate students for life or train students for a career (Abbott).

A student who became disenchanted with the education process explained that the purpose of universities should be to train students for a career, and he eventually decided to leave college because there was too much emphasis on theory and not enough emphasis on practical experience. He stated, "The problem is that the degree without experience doesn't guarantee anything" (Burnell). This sediment was expressed by many students, one of which stated:

> The faculty and academic advisors make college sound more appealing than it really is. They make it sound like if you get a degree, you have it made when in reality there are a lot of people who can't find jobs in their fields. (Tyson)

Student incongruence with the university understandably increases when a student realizes that the time and financial commitment necessary to graduate from college carries no guarantees. One student said, "I think there was definitely a myth regarding the opportunities I'd have if I got a degree. I know of only two people who graduated from the interior design program who actually now work in that field" (Dallin).

Clearly, for many students incongruence results from expectations about college that are never fully met. Many students feel that universities exaggerate the benefits of

obtaining a college degree. One student said that "universities are just like any other business, and they are trying to convince the consumer that a college education is for everyone" (Tibbel). Another student said that the benefits of college are overstated which is evident by the common belief among students that "the longer they go to school the better their income will be, and the more financially stable they will be once they get out" (England).

In addition to incongruence caused by unmet expectations about the value of a college education, incongruence, for several students, stemmed from a feeling that universities were not willing to accommodate the needs of a diverse student population. One student commented that she was forced to drop out once she had a baby because the music department did not offer any of the classes she needed at times when she could take them. She said:

> They told me they didn't have enough students or money to warrant more classes to be taught and to be taught at different times. The system continues to tailor to the students who can go to school in the day and can go full-time. (Abbott)

Another student said:

> I think college should accommodate different people's needs. They should teach a wider variety of classes at different times. I think they need to tailor classes for the nontraditional students, students who are working to complete their degrees more slowly or people who just want to learn about subjects

they find interesting. (England)

Incongruence exists when the needs of students and the orientation of educational institutions do not mesh. One student indicated that because the academic community is not willing to change its orientation to accommodate less traditional students, many students are looking for institutions that will, like the University of Phoenix. "Working full time I can't get the classes I need. The goals of the University of Phoenix are more in line with the goals and needs of many students" (Smith).

Of the various types of incongruence that emerge between students and institutions of higher education, one appears particularly interesting. One student explained that when she returned back to the University of Utah after not having been a student there for years she sadly discovered that:

> Lost was the code of ethics, personal respect, honor and dignity. These were all set aside in the name of competition. I was disillusioned at what the educational process had become. It was be the best at any cost. Look at what this 'healthy' competition has done to society. You can see what society will be like in ten years by looking on college campuses. We are training cheats, thieves, liars, stompers. (Bailey)

She concluded, "Perhaps that is why I didn't finish because it had become so shallow. I was disillusioned at what the university had become and stood for."

From the descriptions given by students, it is evident that

incongruence influences the students' decisions to leave college. The student accounts are consistent with Tinto's discussion of incongruence; however, these accounts fill in missing detail, detail which is essential to accurately assess the impact of incongruence on student departure.

Student attrition is of profound concern and in terms of Tinto's model, incongruence and isolation both contribute significantly to the overall problem. However, there are other factors influencing student attrition which are largely dismissed. These factors include many of the pre-entry attributes which impact student intention and commitment.

Family Background and Gender Issues

Clearly, according to participants' accounts, certain pre-enrollment characteristics or attributes significantly influenced their decisions to attend college. It became evident when analyzing the data that family background, especially how one's family viewed higher education, played a key role in most students' decisions to attend college. Most students were strongly encouraged to attend college by their parents. One student indicated that she felt strong pressure from parents to attend and graduate from the University of Utah. She explained:

> There is a lot of family tradition at the University of Utah for me. My mother went to law school at Utah in 1950. My grandfather was the first dean of the University of Utah's medical school. In fact, I am the first one in the family not to graduate from the U since my great grandmother. (Bailey)

Another student said that, for as long as she could remember, her parents expected that when she graduated from high school she would go directly to college. She said, "I never thought about not going" (Tyson). Another student said, "It was ingrained in me by my mother that I needed to go to college, so I could provide for myself and family if I were ever divorced or widowed" (Abbott). Still another student said, "I was primed to go to college from a young age. My father, who was an attorney, began bringing home law school brochures when I turned fourteen" (Bourman).

For some students, friends played a role in their decision to attend college. One student explained:

> I always thought I would go to college because my friend's parents stressed college. I decided to go because all my girlfriends were going. It was not because of pressure at home. No one in my family had ever been to college. My father didn't even graduate from high school. (Rogers)

It is evident that influence from family and friends plays a role in many students' decisions to attend college. However, in Tinto's discussion of the factors influencing student "intention and commitment," he also discusses the influence of personal attributes and values on student departure. Tinto seemingly groups many of these characteristics (e.g., sex, race, physical handicaps, political and intellectual preferences) together and scarcely recognizes their overall influence on a student's decision to enter college but then at some point to leave (Tinto,

Leaving College 115). Significantly, though, every one of the eighteen students interviewed mentioned gender as a factor influencing their decision to enroll in or depart from college.

Historical tensions between men and women surfaced with some intensity in many interviews with both sexes. Terry Bailey, a nontraditional student, who left the University of Utah, considers the pursuit of higher education more difficult for women, stating that "women have tougher decisions to make because they are viewed as the foundation of the home and family and as the caretakers. The demands of being a woman are extreme and the decisions are extremely difficult." Another student indicated that "men don't have to face the tough decisions. Do you work, go to school, or have a family?" She went on to say that college is also more difficult for women because "it is tailored to the male" (Abbott). This claim was supported by Ms. Bailey who described the university setting as inherently male oriented. She stated:

> The questions asked on exams, and even the way in which they are worded, reflect a male orientation. Males write and speak in a male way that in many ways exclude women. They will deny this of course, but most professors are men, textbooks are written by men, and college politics are dominated by men. Professors unconsciously speak to male students. It is subtle and unintentional, but the discrimination still exists.

In addition to viewing higher education as inherently male oriented, many students recognize a greater value being placed on

men's education. One student indicated that this is evident by the way in which people talk about working men and women. "The woman's income is still considered the second income in the traditional family, so there are different expectations in terms of men's and women's college education" (Bourman).

All eighteen students interviewed believe different expectations exist for men to attend and graduate from college than for women. One male student indicated that "men who drop out of school are viewed as failures, but women who finish are viewed as ambitious. It is a double standard" (Smith). This perceived double standard was described by the men in the following ways:

- When I tell people I'm not in school they react negatively and ask me why. People don't seem to have this same reaction to women who are not in school. They are subject to different expectations. People think that if men don't graduate then they won't go anywhere in life. (Burnell)
- Most people expect men to finish college where women aren't subject to the same expectations. The expectations for men to finish is almost a given. Although things have changed over the last twenty years, men who don't finish college are quitters and women are viewed as aggressive. (Tibbel)
- Men have always been viewed as the providers even though most women work now. The man's education comes first for most people. Men's education is viewed as

more important because in people's minds a degree is necessary to get a good job and pay the bills. (Shurtliff)

As a result of the perceived expectation for men to graduate from college, most men interviewed felt a sense of embarrassment for not having finished college. One student commented, "There is a stigma attached to men not going to school. If you aren't going to school, they ask what you are doing then. I feel kind of embarrassed to say that I am just working" (Shurtliff). This embarrassment is also evident by the fact that six of the men who had initially agreed to be interviewed called back because they had changed their minds. Most indicated that they would prefer not do talk about it because it was embarrassing, and they were hoping to go back.

The women also recognized this dual standard in terms of the value society places on a woman's education in comparison to a man's. This dual standard was described by women in the following ways:

- The general social view is that it is fine for women to go to college, but what really matters is that men get an education to support their families. (Tyson)
- Women are expected to get a husband not finish college. It is okay in society's eyes for women not to finish. (Jeffries)
- I think it is more acceptable if women decide to take a different option like just working and not finishing school or staying at home and rasing a family. If men

don't finish people ask, "What are you going to do or how are you going to get a good job without a college education?" (Dallin)

- The expectations for men and women are different. If a woman drops out for any reason society looks at it as okay. You wouldn't make the same judgments about men. If he drops out he's a wimp. It's the traditional roles of the man being the breadwinner and being expected to finish college. (England)
- If a girlfriend graduates, I find myself thinking that is great, but if a girlfriend's husband doesn't graduate, I wonder what is wrong with him. (Rogers)

This dual standard was best expressed by a female student who indicated, "If I had been a boy, my family would have reacted differently to my decision to drop out. Because I am a girl, it was okay. If I were a boy, I would have stayed in college" (Hart).

These comments clearly show that, for many students, gender plays a significant role in the decision to attend and withdraw from college. Men seem to experience greater pressure to attend school and more embarrassment if they leave school without a diploma. In spite of the double standard, men do leave college, and the male participants in this study attribute their departure to incongruence, academic isolation, and financial difficulties. However, the reality of the dual standard is evidenced by every male participant's attempt to reconcile his departure by

indicating a desire at some point to return. Very few of the female participants, in contrast, mentioned plans to return.

The gender issue raised by the participants questions whether Tinto may have minimized the overall impact of pre-entry attributes on student attrition. Interestingly enough, however, the attributes mentioned by participants in this study were limited to family background and gender. Participants did not discuss any of the other pre-enrollment characteristics as having impacted their attendance and departure from college. This does not, however, suggest that the other characteristics can and do not influence student attrition. It only serves to raise a question regarding whether Tinto may have underestimated the impact of other pre-enrollment characteristics on student departure.

If this is the case, Tinto is ignoring some of the most central and complicating factors in the attrition problem. A deeper understanding of these pre-entry socialization experiences is essential because college programs designed to help student retention may fail if they ignore these pre-enrollment characteristics and socialization experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

The study served to identify the elements of Tinto's model which appear to be most significant for students leaving college. Based on participant accounts, mentoring relationships appeared to have the greatest impact on academic and social integration and student retention; extracurricular activities and peer interaction seemed to have little or no impact on the

participants' decisions in this study to attend and depart from college.

These findings support the findings of the research described in the review of literature which suggests that peer interaction has a less significant influence on student retention than factors such as student-faculty interaction and the development of mentoring relationships. The findings of this study also support Tinto's claims concerning the overall importance of isolation and incongruence on student departure; All of the participants described their eventual departure either in terms of isolation or incongruence. This study, however, provides something that is lacking in Tinto's research. It answers important questions regarding student attrition and provides student accounts in rich detail. In addition, it discusses how negative interaction and the lack of mentoring relationships can inversely impact student retention.

The attention directed toward gender, by each of the participants, questions Tinto's claim that the personal characteristics influencing student "intention and commitment" are somewhat insignificant in terms of student departure. This gives rise to an apparent need for further investigation into the overall role that pre-enrollment characteristics play in the student attrition problem. The fact that participants in this study did not discuss characteristics other than family background and gender as having influenced their decisions to attend and leave college may suggest a need for further research, especially on the potential role of other pre-enrollment

characteristics on student departure.

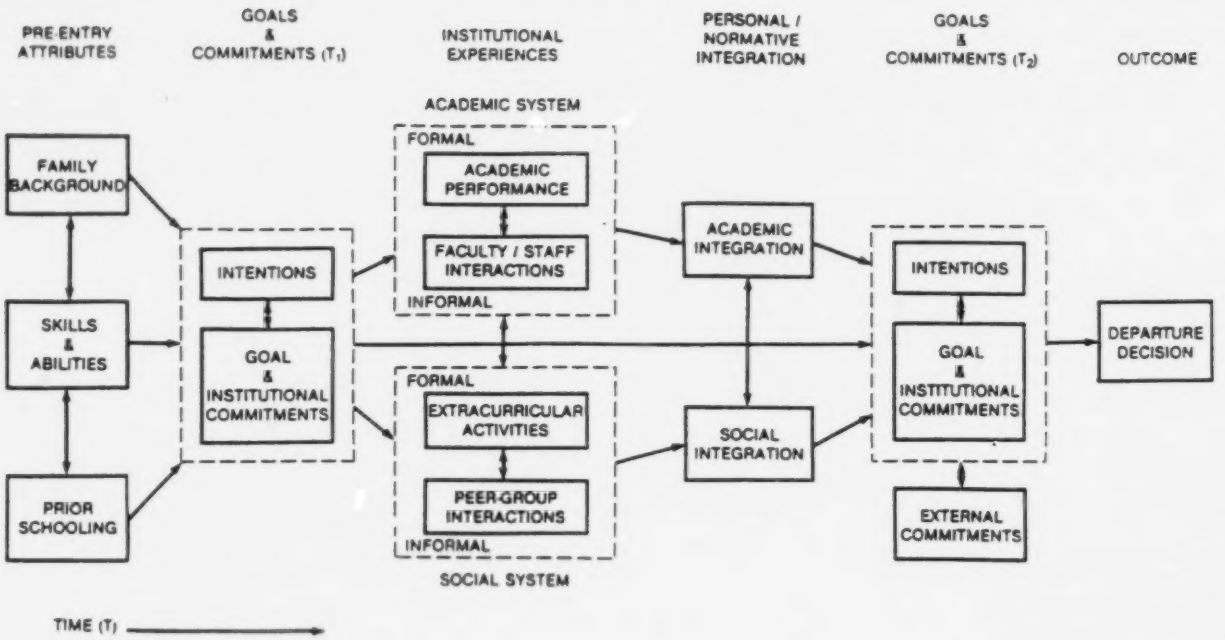
One potential limitation of this study is the rather limited diversity among the participants interviewed. Most participants are white, which automatically excludes some of the pre-entry attributes such as race. A second study, including interviews with students of more diverse backgrounds, would be a useful comparison to conclusions reached in this study.

This study, however, overcomes some potential limitations of previous attrition research which focused largely on measuring the variables in Tinto's model (e.g., peer interaction, faculty interaction, academic performance) but which ignored students' voices and their personal accounts of college experiences. This study provides descriptive accounts which are essential to explain and understand the causes of student departure. Tinto himself noted that "no study of the roots of student departure is complete without reference to student perceptions," especially the perceptions students have of their own experiences (Leaving College 127).

Overall, these descriptive accounts provide a more complete understanding of the causes of student attrition. However, excluding all other justification for this study, the descriptive accounts provided by the participant have, at the very least, provided personal narratives of student departure that explain the problem in an interesting and enlightening manner.

APPENDIX I

Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure



A model of institutional departure

APPENDIX II

Interview Schedule

1. When did you first decide to attend college?
2. Did you feel pressure to attend college?
3. If so, who or what influenced your decision to attend college?
4. How did you select a college to attend?
5. Describe your initial impressions of your college experience?
6. What was your general area of study?
7. What was your best experience while attending college?
8. What was your worst experience while attending college?
9. Did you interact with faculty members while attending college?
10. How would you describe your interaction with faculty members?
11. Did you seek assistance from academic advisors?
12. If so, describe your experiences with academic advisors?
13. What type of social interaction did you have while attending college?
14. Describe the type of social groups and activities you participated in while attending college.
15. Describe the circumstances surrounding your decision to leave college.
16. Was there a particular incident that led to your departure from college?
17. - If so, describe the incident.
    - If not, what were some of the factors that contributed to your decision leave college?
18. How did people react to your decision to leave college?
19. Do you have a desire to return to college at some future time?

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